



## KUKI WAR OF INDEPENDENCE 1917-1919

(Anglo-Kuki War 1917-1919)

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### ABSTRACT

*The Kuki movement against British aggression into their territory began in 1777 culminated to the 'Kuki War of Independence', the so called 'Kuki Rising of 1917-1919'. The extensive preparations for the ensuing confrontation with the mighty British involved mobilisation of forces and declaration of war according to Kuki custom reflect the nationalistic character of the event.*

*The Kuki Rising was a part of the First World War, marked by a momentous offensive against British colonial rule. In the Second World War, Kukis, under the leadership of Pu Pakang, alias Japan Pakang and the Indian National Army (INA) led by Subhas Chandra Bose, sided with the Axis powers to free their lands from British domination. The victory of the Allied forces, however, led to the division of Bose's motherland into India and Pakistan, and trifurcation of Kuki territory (Zalen-gam), the ancestral land of the Kukis, among India, Burma, and Pakistan, resulting to the imprisonment of 11 Kuki war hero chiefs from present day India and another 11 Kuki chiefs from present day Myanmar/Burma into Andaman & Nicobar Island cellular jail for 3 years each and 4 years for Kuki Rajah, Chengjapao DOUNGEL, eldest Kuki clansmen.*

### Introduction:

The Kukis were a fiercely independent people, never in history ruled by any other authority than their noble Chieftains, who also reigned over the entire hills in Manipur, parts of

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Nagaland, parts of Assam, Tripura, Chittagong Hills Tract of Bangladesh and Saggaing Division of Burma prior to the advent of the British. The colonial's order to go to France as porter was deeply resented by the Kukis and thereby confrontation between the two arose on account of the later's refusal to comply the order for want of freedom or independence.

The two great Kuki Chiefs, Chengjapao DOUNGEL of Aisan and Lhukhomang Haokip@Pache of Chassad, who was also the head of the Haokip Clan, took up the responsibility and initiative for Zalen-gam. They organised political meetings at regular intervals. With a view to form an alliance against the common enemy, in one of those meetings, feelers were sent to Bengali Militants. Positive response was given. Maj. Gen. D.K. Palit had recorded in his book, '*Sentinels of the North East*', (Palit, op,cit); 'Bengali Nationalist Organisation (BNO) from Sylhet and Cachar sent emissaries to the Kuki Chiefs of the Southern Clans encouraging them to resist the high handed methods of the British'

Meetings after meeting were held subsequently, attended secretly by Bengali nationalist Militants. The Kuki chiefs were informed that British colonialism was deeply resented by various Countries and Kings. In addition, at that time, the Axis powers of Germany, Japan, Austria and many others had agreed to wage war against the British. This had greatly encouraged the Kukis and thereby hectic preparations were made to fight the Mighty British.

### **Keywords:**

Colonialism, Aggression, porter, freedom, war, militancy,

### **Kuki Preparations for War against the British**

The Kuki chiefs made preparation for war against the mighty British with utmost care and enthusiasm to protect their ancestral land from the British Colonialist. Priority was given to manufacturing of 'Guns and Explosives' known as 'Pumpi' [*Col. L.W Shakespear,1977: 215*] a cannon explosive, made from the skin of a 'Mithun' also called 'Selvun'. *Col. L. W. Shakespear* has given his description about 'Kuki Cannon Explosive', in his book, '*History of the Assam Rifles*' [*D.K Palit, 1983: 62*]. Relationship was also made with the Germans, [*P.S Haokip, (1998), vol. 1:76*] hoping that the war in Europe would be won by Germany and that German Force would be sent to India to extend military assistance.

## **An Oath of Commitment ceremony for Waging War:**

To begin the war against the British, a ceremony of an oath for waging war, called 'Sajam Lhah' [*P.S Haokip, 1998: 78*] was performed. All Kuki Chiefs and Kuki populace were alerted about the declaration of war. Information was given to the whole region where Kukis settled, covering Eastern Sector (Chassad Area), Northeastern Sector, Burma Sector, Upper Burma Sector, Southern Sector, Western Sector (Jampi & Laijang Area), Northern Sector (Ahthibung Area of present-day Nagaland), and Assam Sector (North Cachar & Karbi-Anglong Area), [*P.S Haokip, 1998: 79 -80*].

In the mean time, two emissaries were sent to German Leaders and a 'Secret Agreement' was made between the Kukis and the Germans that Arms and Ammunitions would be sent to Zalen-gam Kukis in their war for independence. In pursuance of the secret agreement, the following points were agreed at the meeting held in the first week of March 1917 at Aisan village, commonly known as 'Aisan Meeting'. In the meantime 'War Message and Signal' locally known as "*Thingkho Le Malcha*" was Sent, this was passed on from village to village.

The Zou-Kuki chiefs such as Goulun, chief of Hiengtam, Langzachin and Lagou accepted the message of war, *Thingkho Le Malcha*, and joined the Thadou-Kuki chiefs. Hiengtam and Gotengkot were the two main centres where Kuki army men from Zou tribe operated in collaboration with Thadou-Kuki chiefs in the region. It is said, Lienkhum, Thangchin, Henthang and Thanglian got killed in the Muollum episode in an encounter with the British troops, [*TC K. Anthony Pakap:2009*]. At this tragic event of the death and casualties on the part of Kuki army, the deceased group terminated its active participation in the war before the end of the war in 1919.

Further the messenger was passed on from region to region up to Chinhills of Burma with the following order: (Haokip,op,cit).

- 1) All Kuki people should take part in the war. To ensure their participation, all Kuki Chiefs should assemble in their own area and perform 'Sajam Lhah'.(Oath of commitment ceremony).
- 2) If any chief was unwilling to take part in the war, he would be dispossessed of his chiefship and his village burnt down.
- 3) Every village should start stocking Arms, Ammunitions and Gun Powder.

- 4) Every village should be fortified.
- 5) Every village should stock food grain.

Consequently, regional meetings were held one after the other in region wise. The first regional meeting was held at Chassad, attended by 22 regional Chiefs, followed by the 'Jampi Area Meeting', attended by 10 regional chiefs of the region. This was succeeded by the meeting of 'Longja Area'. All together, 14 regional chiefs participated in the meeting, *[PS Haokip, 1998: 85 -91]*.

Apart from the above order for war preparation, an order was also issued by the eldest Kuki clan Chief Chengjapao Doungel of Aisan (who was known as the Kuki Rajah) that, "no Kuki should response to the call of the British to go to France, but rather they should all make preparation to wage war against the British" *[PS Haokip, 1998:88]*. In the meantime Tintong Haokip of Lajiang was made Commander in Chief of the Kuki Force and the war between the Kuki and British forces began with immediate effect throughout all Kuki inhabited areas of present day Manipur, Nagaland and up to Burma in a series of battles in region wise, *[PS Haokip, 1998 75-146]*.

### **Impact of Kuki Rising 1917-1919 in Burma & Lushai Hills**

As stated above, the message of war or 'War Messenger', Thingkho Le Malcha reached Burma within a week. The first to receive Thingkho le Malcha in Burma was a Thadou-Kuki Chief, Kamjahen Haokip, Chief of Phailenjang village in Burma. The messenger was passed on to Thadou-Kuki region of Burma, and then to the Haka Chiefs. The message was further passed on to the Sukte, Tlasun, Hualngo, Sizang, Zahau, Kamhau, Thlantlang, Surkhua and Gungal tribes and Chiefs of Chin hills. In Burma, altogether eleven (11) tribes participated in the British-Kuki war of 1917-1919, declared by the Kuki Chiefs of Zalengam, present day Manipur upon the British at Aisan Meeting, *[PS Haokip, 1998 75-146]*.

The war between the mighty British and the Kukis in Burma escalated to the maximum. The British troops were sent to Haka chiefs of Chin hills and Thadou-Kuki region in Burma, resulting to burning down of 18 villages, *[Vumson, 1980: 137]*. The message of war could not be passed on to the Lushai Hills from Chin Hills on account of three reasons;

- i). 2100 young Lushai men had already gone to France to carry out the order without any resistance in 1916,
- ii). Due to full scale war garrison, movement was impossible,
- iii). No enthusiasm and response of war declaration from Zalengam (present Manipur), where they were not present personally and physically.

However, the British forces defeated them at the closed of 1919. The main reason for the defeat was inferior weapon of the latter. To put up in a nutshell, altogether 4,302 guns were collected from the various tribes and Chiefs of Burma who at last submitted themselves to the British. It is stated that in Burma, all the warring tribes except Thadou-Kukis, submitted to the British authority.

An illustration of the list of guns collected from various tribes in Burma is shown in the table below.

**Chart: 1**

Sl.No.	Name of Tribe(s)	No. of Guns seized	Remarks
1	Gungal	553	The Chiefs have submitted to the British.
2	Haka	605	-do-
3	Haka (Southern tribe)	940	-do-
4	Hualngo	76	-do-
5	Kamhau	307	-do-
6	Sizang	433	-do-
7	Sukte	340	-do-
8	Surkhua	140	-do-
9	Thadou-Kuki	123	Thadou-Kuki Chiefs did not surrender & were imprisoned in Taungyi Jail who were later sent to Andaman & Nicobar Island Jail in INDIA for 3-4 years.
10	Thlantlang	490	The Chiefs have submitted to the British.
11	Tlasun	255	-do-
12	Zahau	40	-do-
#	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>4302</b>	<i>It can be concluded that Thadou-Kukis are patriots defending their rights since the very beginning.</i>

Data Source: Vumson's book, *Zo History: With an introduction to Zo Culture, Economy, Religion and their Status as an ethnic Minority in India, Burma and Bangladesh*, (Published by Author, Aizawl, 1980), p. 133.

4000 youngmen from various tribes of Chin hills were forced to go to Europe, from Chittagong via Akyab-Rangoon to France. On the side of Lushai Hills, 2100 Lusei youngmen have already gone to France voluntarily to help the British forces to carry out the mission of evacuating the wounded, loading and unloading of military supplies of World War I. It is to state that the stated war had little effect in Lushai Hills except in its southern parts covering upper Bawinu to Wantu, and Laitet and Ngaphai localities, [*Vumson, 1980: 137*].

### **Kuki-British War Casualty**

In the two years long arm conflict between the Kukis and the British, the official record, quoted by Donn Morgan Kipgen, "*Understanding the Kuki Rebellion of 1917-1919 & Its True Story*", goes as under, (Kipgen, op.cit), [*Donn Morgan Kipgen, 2004: 3*].

*"73 British soldiers killed in action and 151 wounded, no missing in action and 477 soldiers died of 'disease'. This preposterous, as a 2 years long arm conflict, the British army and military police would have definitely lost no less than 250-350 soldiers, killed in action and around 400-500 wounded in actions, At the sure and steady hands of the exceptional sharp shooting Kuki militiamen armed with around 1000-2000 muskets. As a part of full-scale military expedition, most of the 477 British troops who died as a result of gun-shoot and booby-trap injuries have to be coined as killed in action. The underlying fact is that the final operations were conducted under the command of two generals, whose 2500 British troops, with the support of another 1500 Burma military police, as a part of World War I indicated the awesome respect grudgingly shown by the Empire to the fighting skills and tenacity of 1500 ill-equipped Kuki patriots".*

In addition, altogether 970 guns in India and 600 from Burma were captured from the warring Kukis and 86 villages out of 198, were burnt down by the British, [*Vumson, 1980: 137*]. Both British India and British Burma joined hands together to fight the Kukis, [*PS Haokip, 1998 188-189*]. Altogether over 5000 weapons were said to be captured by the British.

The arm conflict between the Kukis and the British came to an end in the last part of the year 1919, after burning down all the 'Fortified Conclaves' of the Kukis at the following headquarters of Chassad, Longya, Lonpi (Mombi) and elsewhere. However, against odds, the Kukis nonetheless fought valiantly for two and a half years and lost the war honourably to the British, [*Donn Morgan Kipgen, 2004: 3*].

A tabulation chart of British war casualty according to Col. L.W Shakespeare, [*Col. L.W Shakespeare, 1977:237*] and the corresponding Kuki version of British casualties during Anglo-Kuki War 1917-1919, locally known as Kuki War of Independence 1917-1919 is given below.

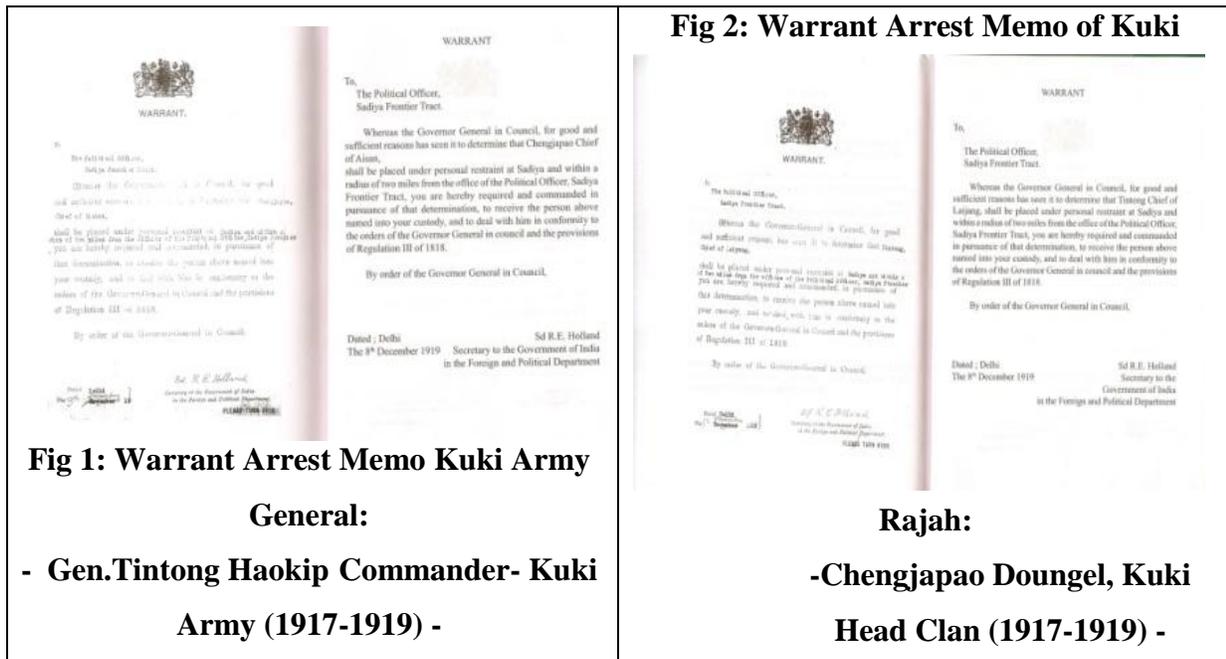
**Chart: 2**

<b>British war casualties (Anglo-Kuki War 1917-1919.</b>		<b>INDIA</b> Western Zalen-gam	<b>BURMA</b> Eastern Zalen-gam	<b>British</b> Version	<b>Kuki</b> Version
1	No.of Officers killed in action	01	01	<b>01:01</b>	<b>07:03</b>
2	No.of Officers wounded	01	04	<b>01:04</b>	<b>Many</b>
3	No.of Riflemen killed in action	47	38	<b>47:38</b>	<b>350:150</b>
4	No.of Rflm wounded & died later	84	99	<b>84:99</b>	<b>Several</b>
5	No.of Porters killed in action	07	Not killed	<b>07:00</b>	<b>Several</b>
6	No.of Porters wounded & died later	393	Not wounded	<b>393:00</b>	<b>Many</b>
<b>Total</b>		<b>533</b>	<b>142</b>		

#### **Trials and Sentences of the Kuki Chiefs and War Commanders:**

After burning down all the fortified conclaves of the Kukis, the war came to an end. All Kuki chiefs were captured alive and imprisoned in Imphal jail for further trials, subjected to severe punishments and torture. In the first trial, prison sentences of 15 years each was made for 11 Kuki chiefs including 20 years each for Kuki Rajah Chengjapao DOUNGEL and General TINTONG HAOKIP, the Commander in Chief of Kuki army, [*P.S Haokip, 1998:161-162*].

A two sample copies of Warrant arrest memo for 11 Kuki chiefs of present day Manipur in India and another 11 Kuki Chiefs from present Myanmar Burma, signed by R.E Holland, Secretary to the Government of India in the Foreign and political Department, dated Delhi, the 8<sup>th</sup> December 1919 in conformity to the orders of the Governor General in Council and the provisions of Regulation III of 1818 is pasted here below for easy references.



Source: London Library, Great Britain, United Kingdom: Warrant Arrest Documents of 11 Kuki Chiefs from Burma and 11 from India (Manipur), extracted from London Library, Great Britain, United Kingdom (UK). Also see P.S Haokip’s book *Zalengam: The Kuki Nation*, pp. 586-603.

In the eastern Zalengam, the present day Burma/ Myanmar, Kuki Chiefs and leaders were detained in Homlin jailed and tortured. All together 11 Chiefs under the leadership of Kamjahen Haokip, chief of Phailenjang were sentenced for 15 years each imprisonment in Taunggyi jail [*P.S Haokip, 1998:161-162*], in Burma. However, in the second trial the previous term of sentences passed were reduced and 3 years each imprisonment in the cellular jail of Andaman and Nicobar Islands, was passed for 11 Kuki chiefs and 4 years for Chengjapao DOUNGEL, being the Rajah (eldest clan chief). On the side of Burma, 3 years each imprisonment in Taunggyi jail for 11 Kuki chiefs was sentenced, who were later shifted to Andaman and Nicobar Islands Jail, which served as a `colony of convict'[*P.S Haokip, 1998:166-162*]. With the attainment of independence by India and Burma in the year 1947 and 1948 respectively, Zalen-gam was divided into two parts; India and Burma, [*Donn Morgan Kipgen, 2004: 3*]. The Kuki people were further divided into India and East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) when Bangladesh got sovereignty, [*Weshler Maxmillian, 2002: 1*].

## Conclusion:

In the post independent Burma, Kuki leaders' appeal for Kuki statehood was denied. Burma's offer to create a Kuki-Naga state was not acceptable. In India, the Kuki Chiefs Association, formed during 1930s was officially changed into Kuki National Assembly (KNA) on 24 October 1946, [AK Ray, 1990: 112-113], to pursue a similar objective of sovereignty, were later reconciled to settle for Kuki Statehood. However, their appeals to the Government of India went unheard, claimed Kuki leaders. Hereafter, the Kuki people joined the Mizo National Front (MNF) movement in 1960s, to integrate their inhabited areas into the present day Mizoram state.

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